



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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DECEMBER 2011

SILVER-BEAKED TANAGER

(*Ramphocelus carbo*)

Photo: Courtney van Beek



The Silver-beaked Tanager belongs to the family of birds known for their beautiful colours: the Thraupidae (Tanager) family. As the name suggests, this bird's beak, which is swollen at the base, appears to be a glistening silver in the field. Without sunlight shining directly on it, this bird appears to be black. However, when in the light, the Silver-beaked Tanager looks as if it were maroon-coloured velvet. One can see its bright crimson chest and throat. The female of this species is far less impressive with a black beak and dull reddish-brown feathers.

This Tanager is found in South America and Trinidad where it inhabits forest borders, estates, semi-open areas, secondary growth and even some neighbourhoods. The Silver-beaked Tanager can be heard at dawn singing "che-wa" for its human and avian friends. It eats fruits of Melastomaceae, other small shrubs and several bromeliads. It will occasionally drink nectar and will also feast on insects. Instead of sallying for their prey, they simply flit forward to grab them.

Sometimes referred to simply as the "Silver-beak", this bird will either be found in pairs or groups of an average size of seven birds. It moults from May to December with a peak in August and September. It calls regularly from January to July. – J.L. Ryan

References:

Hilty, Steven L. *Birds of Venezuela*. 2003.
French, Richard. *Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*. 1991

RAIN FOREST Christmas



CEO Veronica Wallace, her husband Gregory, waitress Charmaine Lackhai bring in the New Year with guests.

Photo: Kenneth Fournillier

Images of Christmastime generally show either the scenes around Bethlehem on that first Christmas night, or the adopted North American and European versions of winter scenes and even "Santa Claus". There is little credence given to the idea of Christmas, and even New Year's Eve, being celebrated in the rain forests.

But we do! And here at Spring Hill we all work to ensure that our guests who have chosen to be in the forest at Christmastime enjoy our own traditional customs and fare.

Christmas is a "long season" in Trinidad and Tobago. It begins in early November with the traditional songs of the Paraderos, the people who play and sing the music of Parang. This is essentially music of our Spanish heritage, mixed with the rhythms of the first Amerindian peoples. There are songs of Advent, played on guitars, mandolins, cuatros (a four-stringed instrument), violins and bass, supplemented with "chac-chacs" (maracas) and "toc-tocs" (claves). The songs are sung in Spanish, and the rhythm is largely Castilian waltz. Traditionally, Paraderos leave their homes to visit neighbouring villages, to sing and play their Parang,

and to share in the food and hospitality of their hosts.

On Sunday 18th December, the Calbio Parang Group visited Asa Wright to serenade our guests. They sang the songs of Advent on the main veranda on a clear starry night, to the background sounds of our crickets, night frogs and pygmy owls.

On Christmas Day, our rain forest guests were treated to a day of sparkling sunshine, and enjoyed their Christmas lunch of turkey and ham, complemented with local traditional dishes of pastelles, pigeon peas and rum-soaked fruit cake.

The rains returned for New Year's Eve, but the Old House at Spring Hill was warmed up with the scintillating sounds of Trinidad's steel drum music. A small ensemble of steel played music for dancing on the verandah, and our visitors – all from cold climes – were able to dance in the cool open air! A steel rendition of Auld Lang Syne drifted down through the forest at midnight, while fireworks burst in the distant sky beyond our valley.

Happy New Year, from the Rain Forests of Trinidad and Tobago, to all of our wonderful friends!



Photos: Caleb Walker



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FLAMING IMMORTElLES



Photo: Atkin Isaac

At this time of the year great swaths of our forests are turning brilliant vermilion! This is because the Immortelle trees (*Erythrina poeppigiana*) are flowering. These are large trees; they grow to a height of about 80 feet (25 metres), and begin to flower at the end of the rainy season, late December, each year.

The Immortelle flower is brilliant orange, and the whole crown of the tree is covered with these outstanding flowers. The view of our northern range hill slopes at this time of year is one of large bands of

orange spread across the deep green foliage.

The Immortelle was also known to early cocoa planters as “madre de cacao”, or Mother of the Cocoa, because Trinidad and Tobago’s very fine cocoa thrives especially in the shade of the Immortelle trees. The Immortelle is also a “nitrogen fixing” tree, and is important to the biodiversity of the forest. The tree is obviously a good host to epiphytes, which grow liberally on its upper branches, and to the Crested Oropendolas, which builds their long hanging nests in the canopy.

Known mostly to the layman for its beauty when flowering, the Immortelle is also called “the Flame Tree”, for obvious reasons.

But as lovely as is the spectacle of the flaming immortalles in the hills around the Centre, there is a slight downside to their presence: many of our humming birds, especially the White-Necked Jacobin, leave the precincts of our verandah to fly up into the vermilion canopies to enjoy the nectar of those flowers!